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ABSTRACT

Noting that in the contemporary world, rhetorical experimentation has proliferated at almost geometric rates, this paper proposes that an understanding of rhetorical variables will help in acquiring an overview and understanding of that rhetorical experimentation. Defining rhetorical variables as all the elements that can take different values in different situations, the paper offers a topology of those variables and shows how they have changed through the ages and in the present according to the controlling ideas of society. The paper also outlines a possible course of study built around the topology. (FL)

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Experimenting with the Limits of Rhetoric

Rhetoricians since the ancient Greeks have studied discourse in order to discover the combinations of elements that cause one communication experience to be more successful than another, that cause people to come into agreement. An analytic survey of rhetorical theory reveals consistent elements in all discourse situations. There apparently exists, therefore, a permanent set of rhetorical variables relating to rhetor, audience, and occasion, which encompasses invention, form, and style. These variables are found in rhetorical theories based on observations of discourse in all times and places. Particular societies, of course, develop particular values for the variables, and, in fact, prefer to stress some while even ignoring or perfunctorily employing others. The kinds of images and myths, patterns of logic, treatment of time, forms, and styles that occur, in fact the whole array of mental activity that produces discourse characterizes the way people of a society are induced to agree with each other about their realities, their courses of action, and their emotional responses. The rhetorical theory developed by a particular society reflects the values of the rhetorical variables favored by that society. The appreciation of logic reflected in the balanced sentences of eighteenth century British society, for example, contrasts sharply with the preference for asymmetrical couplings reflected in the metaphysical conceits of British society a century earlier. Both values reflect elements of the same variables of sentence structure and word choice. In vastly heterogeneous societies like our own, values applied to any of the variables multiply and tend to contradict each other, as do the ideas and mental patterns of the society they reflect. In such societies, rhetorical experiments occur frequently, challenging the established conventions of rhetoric which appear too limited for the communications required.

In all ages, of course, people have deliberately or inadvertently experimented with the variables of rhetoric in response to their communication needs. Many aspects of our discourse now considered thoroughly within conventional limits were once experiments.[1] But it is in the contemporary world that rhetorical experimentation has proliferated almost at geometric rates, stretching the bounds of rhetoric to its recognizable limits. An understanding of rhetorical variables, therefore, will help us acquire an overview and understanding of rhetorical experimentation in our time and its relation to previous experimentation. What variables have dominated what moments in history and with what effect? How do variables counterpoint each other? Or more central to our immediate concerns: to what extent can the values of variables violate the conventions of agreement before discourse disintegrates to meaninglessness or rhetorical mayhem. Finding the answers to such questions may advance rhetorical theory and

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improve our own rhetorical practice.

Rhetorical variables are all the elements that can take different values in different situations. Since they are variables, no definite topological arrangement is possible. The following topology, preferred by the authors, could be rearranged endlessly. It is meant to be suggestive, not absolute.

Variables of the Rhetorical Situation

1. Rhetor

Ethos:	Psychological state, moral state, appearance, style.
Knowledge:	Of self, of audience, of subject, in general.
Attitudes:	Toward subject (pragmatic, judicious, humane, emotional, dogmatic, humorous, ironic, prejudicial, etc.). Toward audience (authoritarian, superior, inferior, hostile, friendly, fearful, worshipful, respectful, disrespectful, indifferent, etc.).
Motives:	Self-oriented (to be loved, admired, hated, etc.).
	Other-oriented (to entertain, celebrate, instruct, move, convince, protest, accommodate, etc.).

2. Audience

Knowledge:	Educational levels, cultural backgrounds, awareness of current events, familiarity with subject, familiarity with rhetor.
State:	Physiological, psychological, ages, sex, social levels, economic levels, religious and moral beliefs, etc.
Size:	One, two, few, many.
Receptivity/ attitude:	Toward rhetor (superior, inferior, hostile, friendly, fearful, worshipful, respectful, disrespectful, indifferent, etc.).
	Toward subject (hostile, friendly, etc.).

Towards occasion (voluntary, involuntary).

3. Occasion

Public:	Ceremonial, persuasive, informative.
Private:	Dyadic, triadic, small group.
Medium:	Vocal, visual.
Physical conditions:	Location, weather, decor, acoustics, light.

4. Invention

Logical:	Induction, deduction, comparison, contrast, classification, cause and effect, analysis, narration, description, analogy, example, definition.
Psychological:	Myths, archetypes, current events and interests, moral postures, shared cultural attitudes.
Empirical:	Results of scientific experiment, statistical data, observation, testimony, records.

5. Form

Prosaic:	Inductive, deductive, spatial, sequential, argumentative.
Dramatic:	Scene, action/plot, characterization, monologue, dialogue, stream of consciousness.
Poetic:	Verse forms, sound patterns.
Cinematic:	Visual-verbal relationships, music.

6. Style

Tone:	Serious, tragic, ironic, light, comic, etc.
Levels of Generality:	Abstractness, concreteness, denotation, connotation.
Point of view:	Grammatical (first, second, third), narrative (narrative distance and angles).

Levels of diction:	Formal, informal, colloquial, slang.
Texture:	Schemes (parallelism, antithesis, inversion, etc.).
	Tropes (metaphor, simile, etc.)
	Imagery
	Rhythm
Complexity:	Monosyllabic, polysyllabic, modification, coordination, subordination.

Variables of the rhetor, invention, form and style are independent; their values can be selected or changed by the rhetor. Some variables of occasion and almost all of audience are not independent. They are a category of variables called parameters, which are conditions, always present in every situation, that the rhetor cannot influence, but they affect the outcome. The rhetor's strategies, however, must take them into account; they influence his or her choice of values for the independent variables. Dependent variables, such as clarity, precision, and appropriateness, are not included. They are the results of strategic employment of the independent variables.

A quick tour through the history of rhetorical theory indicates how these variables were developed and employed. Toward the end of Phaedrus, Plato has Socrates state that first, rhetoric must not be a matter of making the best case but discovering the most truthful case. Second, the speech must be suited to the nature of the audience. Ultimately, Plato judged rhetoric unable to achieve his ideal in the way that dialectic could because of the fixed nature of a text itself. A text cannot modify itself once published nor can it supply further answers to a questioning reader. Ironically, Plato argues his point in a fixed text, and a rhetorically effective one.

What Plato covertly accepted (undoubtedly recognizing he could influence posterity in no other way), his student Aristotle outwardly embraced. In his practical Art of Rhetoric, Aristotle answered Plato's criticism of rhetoric and fathered rhetorical investigation. His major emphasis is motive. No matter what the subject area, the rhetor attempts to establish the probability of an observation being true or real. He establishes probability by discovering through the art of rhetoric, the logical, ethical, and pathetic appeals most likely to persuade a particular audience. Logical arguments top Aristotle's hierarchy. Ethos and pathos operate best through logos. Aristotle described three modes of discourse: deliberative for exploring questions of future action

mandated by legislative acts, forensic for judging the right and wrong of past action, and epideictic for praising or condemning actions.

These modes flourished in the Roman Republic, then were undermined with its demise. In the Roman Empire, the deliberative mode faded when public issues became undebatable. The emperor's word was the authority in the assembly just as it was, except for petty cases, in the courtroom. Politicians and lawyers became technicians first, orators second. Cicero applied the principles of logic to moral actions and literature, concentrating on the stylistic variables important to achieving different stylistic effects, from the plain to the ornate.

For St. Augustine the role of rhetoric was to present truth already known, to reaffirm the faithful or convince the prospective believer despite the moral limitations of both rhetor and audience. Authority became a dominant rhetorical variable, as it had been in the Roman Empire, except that God's word rather than an emperor's was the final determinant. And eloquence, Ciceronian style adapted to Christian purposes, was to St. Augustine the sword to wield in the battle against paganism.

In the Middle Ages rhetoric included debate and disputation but its written forms were mainly letters and sermons or homiletics, all in the epideictic or demonstrative mode. With the invention of printing and the refurbishing of the human spirit during the Renaissance, rhetoric flourished. But it was the rhetoric of exuberance, of eloquence, of copiousness, such as Shakespeare's. The very title of Erasmus' rhetoric, De Copia, expresses the new emphasis on the ways of inducing agreement. Style, which Aristotle minimized along with arrangement, style became all--that is, until the reaction of Bacon and the Royal Society. With the reawakening to the sensate world came a renewal of the ancient search for the real which spawned the new science, empiricism. Empiricists sought the real by querying nature through controlled observation and experimentation. The result was a new rhetorical means of argument, of bringing authors, in this case scientists, into agreement with each other primarily and with other audiences: data as evidence. Scholars began to use logic not simply to contend metaphysical, physical, social, and moral problems, but to devise experiments and analyze their results. The eloquence was deflated to utilitarian prose, the simplest that could accommodate the complexities of the subject, the plain style that Aristotle had preferred. Utilitarian prose enhanced the availability of culture for the expanding middle class audience of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and contributed to the influences that brought the novel into being. Ironically, however, the scientists from whom the Royal Academy demanded utilitarian prose developed a new parochial and esoteric eloquence, with tortuous constructions that Samuel Johnson considered barbarous inventions and importations of language.

In addition to these rhetorical styles in the eighteenth century, the old eloquence stemming from Cicero was perverted to an ornate style, mostly by elocutionists. Rhetoric, apparently, had become a popular art, but concentration was mostly on style and form, since Peter Ramus had diverted some variables of invention into the study of logic two centuries earlier, and literary theorists had assumed the others. Eighteenth century literary theorists discovered Longinus' On the Sublime (written c.260 A.D.), a treatise that named rhetoric as the source of three of the five means for achieving sublimity: appropriate use of figures, nobility of diction, and dignity and elevation of word order. But rhetorical means were insufficient in themselves. Longinus emphasized grandness of conception rather than figures of speech as the essential way to sublimity. The thing or idea was sublime, not the language. Inadvertently, therefore, he stimulated the plain, perspicuous style which flourished in the eighteenth century. Blair incorporates both these ideas in his popular Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. A prime notion of his theory is the balancing of the strange with the familiar, creating a harmonious effect not unlike the pleasure Aristotle speaks of as the soul moves toward equilibrium. Along with Campbell and Whately, Blair reincorporates the variables of invention. It is an audience-centered rhetoric that focuses on ways to manage ideas and proofs in discourse after they have been discovered in order to inform, persuade, entertain, or move audiences.

The most influential contribution of modern theorists is Kenneth Burke's Pentad, whose ratios of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose form a dynamic principle for exploring the motives of any piece of discourse but particularly literary works, and the notions of identification and consubstantiation. These terms refer to the sharing of experience in which writer and reader become one, reach agreement, while still maintaining their individuality.

On the other hand, communication theory completely separates communicators. The "I and Thou" relationship becomes a "I to You" relationship. The fundamental idea of communication theory is quantitative, not qualitative; the fundamental situation the transfer of ideas from an encoder to a decoder through some sort of medium. These messages are called information. Bits of information are received when channel capacity and redundancy sufficiently accommodate the rate at which the information is transmitted and the attendant amount of noise.

Scholars from other fields have influenced rhetorical theory, especially the variables of invention. For example, the work of the psychotherapist Carl Rogers has reshaped our long held conception of human beings as essentially rational, capable of being persuaded to another's views through logic. Rogerian theory assumes that humans are essentially threatened beings. They

acquire individual values and beliefs about reality and truth through experience and maintain these beliefs because others threaten their identity. Gaining agreement with others, then, becomes more likely when the sense of threat is reduced so alternative views can be considered. Based on this theory, the main goal of communication is not to persuade another but to establish and maintain communication itself.

The philosopher Susan Langer has also worked with rhetorical invention. She uses the ideas of Jung and Freud to talk about symbol, myth, ritual, psychic elements that move us to agreement. These elements are not found in the early rhetorics, which deal with the external world. Her fundamental idea is that different eras formulate different generative questions. Our generative questions today center around epistemology: what do we know and how do we know it? She points out that we no longer believe in factual evidence because we have only recorded signs, not facts. Her conclusions coincide with a haunting doubt that prevails in the physical science, where empiricism began, about the validity of empirical evidence. As questions are answered, more arise as in a never-ending Chinese box. Our instruments that extend our ability to see and hear far beyond human capability are fallible, and we know only in terms of statistics, of uncertainty or probability.

The result of this unsettling modern insistence on the problematic nature of existence is vastly increased experimentation: experiments to find new personal values, new societal structures, new art forms, and new values for the rhetorical variables. Examining the interplay of rhetorical variables in a variety of rhetorical situations and experimenting with them ourselves reveals not only the variety of choices writers and speakers make and their consequences, but also helps characterize their times.

Let us take Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground as a simple example. Our expectations of the fictional mode include a structured world with characters, plot, action--an imaginary world but one bearing a credible relationship to our experience. Dostoevsky presents an imaginary world, but we quickly lose sight of it. Ideas, intellectual cruxes such as free will, rationalism, and humility confounded with pride, bombard us. Such stress reduces aesthetic involvement. Instead of responding to Dostoevsky's narrator, we concentrate on the ideas debated, applauding or rejecting them. We react as to a polemic. But midway in his novella Dostoevsky shifts his rhetorical strategy to other variables. He plunges his "hero" into a lifelike experience. Aesthetic involvement regained, we pity him in his defeat as he reaches out for friends and love. We no longer argue with his ideas but recognize that although few people are as fevered and neurotic as he, many are often defeated as he is by flaws in their own personalities. And agreement with this conclusion as truth is what Dostoevsky seeks. Agreement on the

earlier intellectual debate is not essential, but his use of the debate serves the author's deeper purpose by contrast of modes.

Let us take a more complex example, Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha: Each One As She May." Stein's ostensible purpose is to provide a serious literary treatment of Black life, but we get less a representation of a real world peopled with believable characters than a vehicle for experimenting with the rhetorical variables of language and form, essentially linguistic redundancy as the teller of time in which the story progresses, both backwards and forwards. For these experimental purposes, the author does not distinguish the dialect of Jeff, an educated doctor, from Melanctha, unschooled student of Black passion. In this story, the experimentation attenuates the reader's involvement. Stein's tortured verbalisms, words about words, suggest that her interest lies more in manipulation of variables than in the reader's appreciation. Because of its length, the reader who perseveres after the first delights of refreshing language and form risks drowning in redundancy without the compensation of deepened meanings.

The Roman Catholic church's adoption of the vernacular to replace the Latin liturgy can also be seen as rhetorical experiment in another vein. So is the Episcopalians' 1979 Book of Common Prayer replacing the 1928 version, which remained essentially faithful to its sixteenth century predessor by Archbishop Cranmer. The leaders of both denominations intended to entice the wandering back to the pews with a liturgical language closer to their own. But the result has not been a return of the errant nor the capture of new converts. Congregations here and there defiantly cling to the old liturgy. The rhetorical variables inherent in the psychology of ritual and audience attitudes, described by Susan Langer, were miscalculated and the intention misfired. Familiarily bred contempt.

In another vein, Tom Wolfe brought a new and exciting face to the report with the use of fictional techniques in "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby" in Esquire (1963). Truman Capote did the same with his non-fiction novel In Cold Blood.

Results of such experimentation with the limits of rhetoric, both controlled and uncontrolled, can be evaluated by means of our topology of variables. Its application also brings to the conscious level strategies employed in "ordinary" writing, once experimental perhaps. We may be surprised at some discoveries. Certain variables are often used without our conscious intention--redundancy, for example. In order to insure a reader's reception of our meaning, we repeat ideas in many ways. We employ synonyms and examples, parallel structures to connect like ideas, rhythms and sounds that echo and re-echo. We often repeat the same ideas with different techniques to buttress a simple argument.

The topology allows us to see relationships among the variables. A study of stylistic variables links word choice, phrase and clause complexity, amount of modification, and level of abstraction. The greater the degree of modification, especially with complex phrases and clauses, the greater the level of abstraction and the lower the density of primary substantives like nouns and verbs. Seeing relationships between variables, writers can employ them in mutually compensating and reinforcing ways. Increased levels of abstraction can be offset, for example, with certain techniques such as parallelism and reduced modification to retain clarity. The topology also promises a systematic way of considering audience. Abstractions and technical terminology may be welcomed by knowledgeable readers, but such abstractions and technical terms stated in independent clauses might threaten others. But if rephrased with subordinate explanations, the threat might lessen or disappear. Empirical evidence would be more likely to convince a physics scholar, biblical authority or a Christian. Induction would be more effective within a democratic society, deduction within the confines of a dictatorial one. Some rhetors prefer to achieve their motive through imaginative narrative, the use of scene, character, and action. In the most imaginative, highly symbolic fictionalizing, the rhetor himself or herself becomes the primary audience which must be brought to agreement (that things are "right") rather than the one "out there." Some rhetors habitually compare and contrast as a means of developing their ideas, stylistically reordering them in, say, frequent antithesis, compound sentences with many observative connectives, and climax patterning.

With continual application of the topology, the variables will seem to cross, to mesh, to become finally inseparable. Indeed the topology may have its greatest value in its fallibility and incompleteness. Its inadequacies should open our minds to further possibilities of rhetoric. Fundamentally, variables are meant to increase our awareness of the way in which the words we read and write function. No matter what the variables, their ratios, or their relationships, the rhetorical effectiveness of any piece of discourse is determined by the audience's response. The key question is: did the writing move the audience to agreement? Writers who understand the relationships of rhetorical variables will know when and how to employ and modify them to suit their audience, their purpose, and their circumstances, and thus enhance the possibilities of gaining audience agreement.

Thus far we have been talking about rhetorical theory and practice in general, but the concept of rhetorical variables also has pedagogical implications. The course of study our discussion implies has proven in practice to be challenging and useful for advanced students of rhetoric and writing. It gives students the license to move beyond their ordinary patterns toward discovery.

Students are invited to violate themselves, to write in someone else's mode or another culture's mode, to choose certain variables for experimental purposes and then see what happens with other variables. Once students have ventured out of their ordinary pattern, whether they resume old habits or not, they will never be the same writers they were before.

The first part of the course focuses first on a synoptic history of classical and modern rhetoric, more detailed than outlined above but far from exhaustive. This discussion provides the sources from which students can inductively elicit their own topology of rhetorical variables. The topologies generated may be more broadly or finely discriminated than the one included in this paper. But students do circle around the major variables and their components in sufficiently similar manner to produce a composite topology. Simply naming the major variables forms an important first step in recognizing the many factors involved in rhetorical acts. In a second step students become even more acutely aware of the array of mental activities involved in rhetoric. Based on discussions of current rhetorical theories and contemporary ideas in other fields--philosophy, psychology, etc.--they assess the impact on the limits of rhetoric and revise the topology.

In the second part of the course the topology guides student analysis of the writing others have done, especially the more avante garde experimental efforts. Students will be struck by the effectiveness of how other writers use white space, write with an awareness of faking, manipulate time, employ pauses, strengthen a simple argument through harmony and balance. And they will discover too that all experiments do not work, except for minute, esoteric audiences. Some writers hinder their readers' understanding by unnecessarily complicating the variables, by presenting chaos from which meaning does not emerge.

Along the way students work on small experimental assignments, finger exercises in preparation for their major experimental effort. They may choose a topic and write a paragraph about it with the motive of persuasion, then rewrite the material with the motive to seduce, then rewrite it to obtain a cathartic effect. Or they may write a paragraph in a paratactic style, then rewrite it with an excessive amount of subordination and modification, then rewrite it but add redundant features, each time with a view to gauging probable effect on an audience. Another exercise might be to key in on three different perspectives of a single thing, idea, or event. One student responded to this assignment by revealing three different viewpoints of an automobile accident one a report to a lawyer, another a letter to an ex-marine buddy, a third a diatribe from an irate citizen; in each the student assumed a different person, none himself. For one of these finger exercises another student produced a particularly excellent parody of

Doestoevsky's Notes from the Underground, changing the obsession to crossword puzzles, and playing with the notion of redundancy.

In the third part of the course, while readings of experiments in prose continue, students compose a final experimental piece. To encourage wide experimentation, the assignment is intentionally open ended. Students write a proposal outlining their project and the variables which will be manipulated. They need to decide how they will use certain variables--myth, time, the appeal to be made, the relationship to audience, and so forth. Most variables are held constant while others are varied. But students are not bound by their proposals since experimentation, by its very nature, is a discovery process. The primary motive is for students to violate themselves, do something out of the ordinary, smash their habitual crystallizations. (This, of course, requires exploration of what is the self being violated.) A great variety of experiments are produced, limited only by a student's imagination and desire for rhetorical exploration. In the fashion of the recent update of Ben Johnson's Volpone to a late nineteenth century San Francisco setting, a student may rewrite a published fictional piece, change a character, or take characters from one story and put them into another. Or he or she may take an event, a moment in time and expand it, distort it, treating it fictionally, reportorially, and essayistically, or perhaps interweave the three modes. There are enormous possibilities for realizing tensions once purpose is firm.

Following their analyses of professional experiments, the students' own experimentation further enforces their consciousness of the ways words gain rhetorical effect. Experimentation not only expands the horizons of accomplished writers, it helps students whose writing efforts consist mainly of getting ideas on paper. Acutely aware of subject, yet unaware of inventional possibilities, hazy about their intentions, oblivious to any audience other than themselves, they struggle to state their idea clearly, coherently, and completely. And often fail. Only dimly aware of rhetorical variables and their potential for exploitation, many students take only limited advantage of the possibilities for rearranging, substituting, adding, and deleting by means of the variables. Writing artistry is not guaranteed by conscious use of rhetorical variables, whether in the experimental or ordinary way, but students do become aware of the complexities of the writing process involved in the quest for agreement. This certainly is a prerequisite for wisely judging how and when to use the variables in a particular rhetorical situation.

In the conclusion of the course, students assess the variables and their interrelationships, commenting on the results of their own project and the impact on aspects of rhetorical theory. Whether their experiments fail or succeed (since rhetorical experimentation follows no system as in science, the only way of judging success or failure is as the experiment affects an audience--and we cannot hold an audience steady), students gain a new or

enhanced sense of audience, a perspective on their preferred style and organization, and an awakening to new techniques and combinations of techniques. One student summed it well through an analogy to a trip to Europe. "When the trip is over, you are changed. You don't know exactly what has been learned, or how much, or to what depth, but you do know that you have experienced something that never happened to you before, and you are a different person."

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Notes

[1]The use of the vernacular was once experimental. And a historical view of English reveals that hypotaxis has increased through experimentation at the expense of parataxis, but we do not think of subordination as experimental at all anymore.